

Tips on Preserving Scrapbooks

by Ivan Hanthorn, for the Iowa Conservation and Preservation Consortium

Scrapbooks are a much beloved and often used means of saving photographs, newspaper clippings, pamphlets, documents, and the other assorted items which document the interests and activities of individuals, families, and organizations. While each is a unique item, scrapbooks share many common characteristics which cause problems.

Materials and techniques commonly used in scrapbooks present real preservation challenges. Album and scrapbook pages are almost always made of low-quality paper that will embrittle over time and contribute to discoloration of the items placed in the scrapbook. The binding structure is often unable to adjust to the bulge caused by overloading the scrapbook, with detached covers a common result. Vinyl plastic commonly used in modern scrapbooks and albums is damaging over time to photographs. Items are often attached to scrapbook pages with harmful tapes and adhesives. Staples and pins, also used for attachment purposes, often rust and contribute to tears of poor quality scrapbook pages. So, what should you do with scrapbooks that you treasure and want to maintain in good condition over time?

Tip #1—An archival quality storage box provides a high quality storage enclosure for scrapbooks. These can be obtained from archival supply sources. Scrapbooks should be stored spine down or flat in the box, depending on box design and scrapbook size.

Tip #2—Shelving small and medium-sized scrapbooks on open book shelves between books of similar size will help to prevent warp and distortion of the scrapbooks.

If you have questions about this tip sheet or other preservation topics, contact:

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Tip #3—Scrapbooks with loose or detached covers can be tied up (package style), preferably with flat cotton tape, to reduce damage. Place the bow knot at the foreedge of the scrapbook to prevent pressure indentations on the covers.

Tip #4—Wrapping loosely bound or damaged scrapbooks with acid-free paper provides better protection than just tying, and is helpful even if the item will be boxed.

Tip #5—Flat storage of scrapbooks is best if they contain pamphlets and similar multiple-page items attached to scrapbook pages or heavy artifacts (e.g., buttons, medals, etc.) loosely attached to the pages.

Tip #6—Handle scrapbooks carefully, they are complex physical structures. Bindings and brittle pages can break and scrapbook contents can easily become detached or torn. If you are making a photocopy, be very cautious about applying pressure that could break the binding of the scrapbook.

Tip #7—Generally it is wiser to leave the scrapbook as you inherited it rather than to try to improve on its construction methods. Attend to storage and handling; contact a conservator if you want to address repair problems.

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